DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 889 RC 023 951

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Dorais, Louis-Jacques |
| TITLE | Why Do They Speak Inuktitut? Language and Identity in Iqaluit. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa (Ontario). |
| PUB DATE | 2001-05-00 |
| NOTE | 12p.; Paper presented at the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (4th, Quebec City, Canada, May 16-20, 2001). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Age Groups; Bilingualism; *Canada Natives; *Diglossia; *English; Eskimos; Ethnicity; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Communication; *Inupiaq; *Language Attitudes; Language Maintenance; *Language Usage |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Nunavut |

ABSTRACT

Residents of Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, discussed why they use Inuktitut or English in different circumstances. Interviews with 50 Inuit adults in Iqaluit inquired about their language usage with six categories of people: their parents, children, spouse, siblings, friends, and fellow workers. No gender differences were found, although some answers varied with age. Almost all respondents spoke only Inuktitut with their parents. About half spoke Inuktitut to their children all or most of the time, with respondents over 50 being the least likely to speak English to their children. Younger parents tended to use mostly Inuktitut with preschool children, but used mostly English or both languages with older children. Dual-language use between spouses was related to younger age and linguistically mixed marriages. Spouses who spoke mostly Inuktitut to each other were older or did so to model the language for their children. Similarly, older respondents were more likely to speak only Inuktitut to their siblings. Workplaces were generally bilingual; speaking English was necessary because of non-Inuit workers and the need to deal with non-Inuit topics. Iqaluit may be rightfully considered a diglossic community, since both languages are needed on a daily basis. However, Inuktitut is not considered an inferior language. Almost all Inuit residents speak Inuktitut fluently, transmit it to their children, and link it to their Inuit identity. (Author/SV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 473 889

# Why Do They Speak Inuktitut?
# Language and Identity in Iqaluit

Louis-Jacques Dorais
Universite Laval, Quebec

Paper read at the 4th International Congress of Arcitc Social Sciences
Quebec City, Canada
May 16-20, 2001

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Louis-Jacques Dorais

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)





BEST COPY AVAILABLE

# WHY DO THEY SPEAK INUKTITUT? LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN IQALUIT

**Louis-Jacques Dorais, Universite Laval, Quebec**

**Paper read at the 4th International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences**
**Quebec City, Canada, May 16-20, 2001**

Residents of Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut have opinions on the reasons why they use Inuktitut or English in different circumstances. Interviews conducted in 1994-95 in Iqaluit, with 50 Inuit adults[1], inquired, amongst other questions, about their language usage towards six categories of people: their parents, children, spouse, brothers and sisters, friends, and work mates. Answers sometimes varied with age, but not with gender, no differences being found in the linguistic behaviour of male and female interviewees. We will look here at the reasons people gave for using one language instead of another.

## Addressing One's Parents and Children

With their father and mother, the vast majority of respondents (42 out of 47 who answered the question) said that they always spoke Inuktitut, the principal reason given being that their parents did not understand English at all, or barely did so[2]. Other reasons were invoked, though. Seven respondents asserted that they addressed their parents in Inuktitut because they grew up doing so, and because it would not be correct to speak them in English. When asked what would be her parents' reaction if she spoke English to them, a middle-aged woman answered that "they would understand if spoken in English, but they would respond in Inuktitut, because we are Inuit

---

[1] Interviews conducted by Nunavut Arctic College (Nunatta Campus) students and recent graduates, under the direction of Susan Sammons and the author in the course of a project on discourse practices in the Baffin region, thanks to a research grant of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) (see Dorais & Sammons 2000, 2002; Dorais 2002).

and our language is Inuktitut."[3] Another, slightly older woman said: "My mother is a real Inuk. If I spoke her in English, she would stare for a second and walk away, smiling."

For Inuit adults, Inuktitut thus seems to be the proper language for addressing one's own parents and to speak to elders in general. The five respondents who did not make exclusive use of Inuktitut with their father and mother were special cases. Two of them stated that they normally spoke Inuktitut to their parents, but because they knew their father understood some English, they used English words from time to time when they did not know the proper term in Inuktitut. Three more informants, all of them below thirty years of age, said they used both languages when addressing their parents. One admitted having some difficulties in Inuktitut and being more at ease in English. The other two had been raised in the Keewatin (western Hudson Bay) community of Arviat, where, they said, their parents were fluent in English and accepted being addressed in this language by their children.

With one or two decades in advance, these Arviat parents may have anticipated the linguistic behaviour of many contemporary fathers and mothers from Iqaluit. When asked which language they used when addressing their children, the 47 respondents with offspring were quite neatly divided into two groups. More than half of them (27 out of 47, or 57.5%) stated that they spoke Inuktitut all the time (17/47), or most of the time (10/47), with their kids, while 42.5% admitted speaking both languages (18/47) or mostly English (2/47) at home.

Major differences were to be found between younger, middle-aged, and older parents, as may be seen from the following table:

---

[2] Those respondents with deceased parents were asked about the language spoken to them when still alive.

[3] Extract from an interview conducted within the project. As with most following extracts, it has been translated from Inuktitut by Ms. Joanna Okpik.

| Language(s) spoken with children | Only Inuktitut | Mostly Inuktitut | Both languages | Mostly English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| respondent under 30 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 15 |
| respondent between 30-50 | 2 | 4 | 12 | 0 | 18 |
| respondent over 50 | 12 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 14 |

Among younger parents (those under 30 years of age), a majority of respondents (9 out of 15, or 60%) asserted that they mostly or exclusively addressed their children in Inuktitut, but a good proportion said they spoke to them in both languages (4/15), or mostly in English (2/15).

Proportions were almost reversed among middle-aged parents (those between 30 and 50). Two thirds of them (12 out of 18, or 66.6%) stated that they addressed their children in both languages , while only six respondents admitted speaking mostly or uniquely Inuktitut with their kids (none used mostly English).

Finally, among older parents (those over 50 years of age), the vast majority (12 out of 14, or 86%) said they always spoke Inuktitut to their children, which is understandable given the fact that 11 out of all 14 respondents belonging to this age group were monolingual in Inuktitut. Only two parents stated that they spoke both languages with their children.

There, thus, seemed to exist a strong tendency for bilingual parents with older (*i.e.* pre-adolescent to young adult) children to use both Inuktitut and English at home. This was somewhat confirmed by the fact that three of the six younger parents who used both languages, or mostly English, with their children were married to Qallunaat[4]. The presence of a non-Inuk parent at home would, in half cases, have explained the equal or prevalent status of English. Moreover, among parents over 50 years of age, two of the three bilingual respondents used both languages with their children, thus extending into this generation the aforementioned tendency towards home bilingualism between bilingual parents and their older children.

As a matter of fact, reasons given by respondents for justifying their behaviour appeared to confirm the explanation given above. Younger parents who spoke exclusively or mostly Inuktitut to their children admitted that they did so because otherwise, the kids would not understand what is said. Some added that these children were Inuit, and that they did not like to address them in English, only using English words when Inuktitut terms were unavailable, too long, or not understood by the child. It seems that it was not considered proper behaviour to speak English to children who, presumably, were too young to have started learning this language at school, like it was judged improper to address quasi-monolingual elders in the language of the Qallunaat.

As for the few middle-aged parents who preferred Inuktitut for addressing their children, they insisted on the fact that if Inuktitut was not spoken at home, it risked being lost by the young generation. "We speak Inuktitut at home; they have enough English at school and when they are with their friends," said a 36-year-old father, while a mother added: "They will have enough opportunities to learn English later." The majority of middle-aged parents, though, justified their use of both languages at home by stating that their children had now become bilingual, and that it was normal and useful to address them in English as well as Inuktitut: "Before they went to school, I spoke them in Inuktitut only, but now that they tend to speak mostly English, I address them in both languages." – "I do it out of habit; they would not understand if I only spoke Inuktitut." – "I use both languages with them because they understand both." – "I often address them in English so that they can learn this language and speak it fluently."

**Addressing One's Spouse**

Linguistic behaviour at home does not only concern parent-child interaction. It also has to do with languages spoken between spouses. Out of 43 respondents who provided answers about

---

[4] Among the 12 middle-aged parents using both languages at home, only three (25%) were married to a Qallunaaq.

the language they used with their husband or wife (whether legal or common-law), a majority of 63% (27/43) stated that they either spoke both languages, or mostly/only English. Here again, differences between age groups were major:

| Language(s) spoken with spouse | Only Inuktitut | Mostly Inuktitut | Both languages | Mostly/only English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| respondent under 30 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| respondent between 30-50 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 16 |
| respondent over 50 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |

No respondent under 30 years of age, and only four of those between 30 and 50 spoke only or mostly Inuktitut with their spouse. By contrast, all 12 respondents over 50 always spoke Inuktitut with their husband or wife. A majority of those who spoke mostly or only English, though, lived with a monolingual Qallunaaq spouse. This was the case with five out of eight younger respondents, and with all five middle-aged informants. Inuktitut-English bilingualism thus seemed to be the rule for two thirds (14 out of 21) of non-mixed couples under 50 years of age.

Two principal reasons were given for justifying this bilingual behaviour. In three cases, dialectal differences between spouses explained that they often resorted to English to understand each other. In two more cases, the gap between dialects appeared so wide that Inuktitut was never, or almost never used: "His dialect is so different that English is the only way to understand each other."

Another cause of bilingualism was that several respondents under 50 – at least eight of them – considered that Inuktitut was not really adapted to the expression of modernity. English appeared to them easier and faster to speak, and in a better position to express a wide range of topics. This was why they limited their use of Inuktitut to more traditional – or homely – topics:

"English is a lot faster and simpler than Inuktitut." – "I use the language in which it is easier to express something." – "I use English to speak about what's going on; I speak Inuktitut when going hunting or when things don't go too well."

A few respondents offered other explanations for their couple's bilingual behaviour: "We do that since long." – "My wife understands both languages." – "We often speak English between us, but before the kids, we mostly use Inuktitut to give them an example." Giving an example to children was also mentioned as an explanation, by a middle-aged informant who asserted that he always spoke Inuktitut with his wife.

**Addressing One's Peers**

With their siblings (brothers and sisters) and friends, younger (under 50 years of age) respondents used more Inuktitut than with their spouse, while people over 50 used a little more English.

With siblings, language usage occurred as follows:

| Language(s) spoken with siblings | Only Inuktitut | Mostly Inuktitut | Both languages | Mostly/only English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| respondent under 30 | 3 | 0 | 9 | 3 | 15 |
| respondent between 30-50 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 13 |
| respondent over 50 | 12 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 14 |

Twenty-four (57%) out of 42 respondents who answered the question asserted that they always (19/42) spoke Inuktitut with their brothers and sisters, or did it most of the time (5/42), while when addressing their spouse, they did likewise in only 37% of cases. More than half (14 out of 24) of these users of Inuktitut were over 50 years of age, but three of them were under 30 (as against none among couples), and seven between 30 and 50. However, the majority of respondents under 30 (12 out of 15, or 75%) used both languages, or mostly/only English, with

their siblings, while this was the case with less than half (6/13) of those between 30 and 50, and with no informant over 50 years of age. Age thus seemed to be the principal factor linked to language usage among brothers and sisters.

One partial explanation to the pre-eminence of bilingual usage among younger respondents was suggested by a number of individuals who stated that they spoke Inuktitut to their older siblings who, often, only understood this language, and English (or an Inuktitut-English mix) to their younger brothers and sisters. Another explanation for bilingualism or near-monolingualism in English was that according to several informants, this language was easier and faster to speak than Inuktitut. Some respondents, though, said that their bilingualism was just an "old habit." This type of explanation was also that of a majority (5 out of 7) of informants under 50 years of age who asserted that they always used Inuktitut with their siblings: "That's what we spoke in our family; [my siblings] would not follow me if I spoke English." – "We grew up like this [speaking Inuktitut]."

The situation was somewhat similar with friends, which half of my informants (25 out of 50) usually addressed in both languages (19 cases), or mostly/only in English (6 cases), while the other half preferred using Inuktitut, always (15 cases) or most of the time (10 cases). Respondents over 50 used much more Inuktitut than younger people, although two of them said they sometimes addressed their friends in English.

| Language(s) spoken with friends | Only Inuktitut | Mostly Inuktitut | Both languages | Mostly/only English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| respondent under 30 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 5 | 18 |
| respondent between 30-50 | 2 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 18 |
| respondent over 50 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 14 |

Reasons given for being bilingual or near-monolingual (in English) with friends were more or less the same than those alluded to when addressing siblings: habitude ("it just happens that

way; it is not a conscious thing"); the alleged qualities of English ("it is faster to communicate in English"); lexical differences between languages ("I discuss topics like income tax in English, but I try to use Inuktitut as much as possible, even for talking about computers"); generalized bilingualism ("I address my friends in both languages, because they understand both"); and, for a young woman who always addressed her friends in English, the fact that "some jokes can only be understood in English."

**Language at the Workplace**

For a majority of my 29 respondents holding a job, both Inuktitut and English were in equal use at work. Seventeen of them (58.5%) said that they spoke the two languages at their workplace. In ten cases, this was because they had Qallunaaq co-workers whom they addressed in English, while speaking Inuktitut to their Inuit work mates. Two respondents were interpreters, an occupation implying professional bilingualism, and one explained that he always spoke Inuktitut with his Inuit co-workers, but that their business meetings were exclusively held in English.

| Language(s) spoken at work | Only Inuktitut | Mostly Inuktitut | Both languages | Mostly/only English | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| respondent under 30 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 2 | 11 |
| respondent between 30-50 | 1 | 1 | 9 | 3 | 14 |
| respondent over 50 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 |

The presence of Qallunaat was also given as the principal reason why five respondents spoke only or mostly English at work, although one of them said that their director was an Inuk from another dialectal region whom his Iqaluit employees preferred to address in English in order to be understood. The vast majority (22 out of 25, or 88%) of respondents under 50 years of age reported using both languages (or exclusively English) at work, while all four older informants detaining a job spoke only or mostly Inuktitut. This shows that in Iqaluit, the workplace is

fundamentally a bilingual – or English monolingual – setting, because of the omnipresence of Qallunaat workers and, also, of the necessity to deal with non-Inuit topics and methodologies.

**Conclusion**

This brief overview of discourse practices in Iqaluit, as reported by 50 interviewees, shows that we may be cautiously optimistic about the status of Inuktitut in the capital of Nunavut. Despite the fact that among individuals below 50 years of age, Inuktitut-English bilingualism seems to dominate when addressing one's spouse, siblings, friends, and work mates, the aboriginal language is still widely heard. The vast majority of young Inuit children speak it and are addressed in it by adults. Their older brothers and sisters may prefer the use of English among themselves, young adults may often resort to code-switching, and middle-aged parents may address their adolescent children in English, but in the presence of elders, all of them are able to – and do – speak understandable Inuktitut.

One interesting fact is the tendency among young parents to address their children in Inuktitut, even if these parents are bilingual and often prefer to use English or resort to code-switching when among peers. When asked about this behaviour, parents answer that it is normal to address young children in Inuktitut, since kids do not speak any other language. It looks as if Inuktitut would be considered the natural language of Inuit, the one to be transmitted to the younger generation. Bilingualism would only appear later on, when schoolchildren reach grades 4 or 5. From then on, however, code-switching would become the rule for youngsters, although they would preserve their basic knowledge of Inuktitut which, as we mentioned, is widely used in the presence of elders, and, hopefully, which they will use later on for addressing their own children.

Iqaluit may be rightfully considered a diglossic community, since both Inuktitut and English are necessary for it to operate on a daily basis. But the analysis of discourse practices

shows that the linguistic inequalities that normally go with diglossia are not as clear-cut as they could be. For sure, English constitutes the *lingua franca* of the community, because it is the only language to be understood by everyone, and, also, the most convenient mean for communicating with the wider world. However, this does not mean that Inuktitut is considered an inferior, or dominated language. Almost all Inuit residents of Iqaluit are still able to speak it fluently[5], and they consider natural to transmit it to their children, even in ethnically mixed families. Moreover, Inuktitut has now become the first official language of Nunavut, and as such, many people expect to see its presence increase at the workplace, and in public life in general. This identity value attributed to the aboriginal tongue is best summarized in the answer many respondents gave when asked why they spoke Inuktitut to their parents, children, or peers: "*Inuummata*" – "Because they are Inuit." That says all.

**References**

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques, 2002. Why Do They Speak Inuktitut? Discourse Practices in the Capital of Nunavut. *Zeitschrift fût Kanada-Studien*, 22(1-2): 116-130.

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques & Susan SAMMONS, 2000. Discourse and Identity in the Baffin Region. *Arctic Anthropology*, 37(2): 92-110.

DORAIS, Louis-Jacques & Susan SAMMONS, 2002. *Language in Nunavut. Discourse and Identity in the Baffin Region*. Iqaluit, Nunavut Arctic College & Quebec, GETIC, 194 pp.

[5] Of course, this fluency may vary according to age, but even young anglicized code-switchers are still able to conduct a conversation in grammatically correct Inuktitut.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

**ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE**

**I. Document Identification:**

Title:
"Why do they Speak Inuktitut? Language and Identity in Iqaluit"

Author:
Louis-Jacques DORAIS

Corporate Source:
Paper read at the 4th International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS-IV), Quebec City

Publication Date:
May 16-20, 2001 (unpublished)

**II. Reproduction Release:**

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please check one of the following three options and sign the release form.

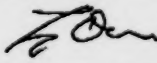
_X___ Level 1 - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) and paper copy.

____ Level 2A - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only.

____ Level 2B - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no option is marked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

**Sign Here:** "I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Signature:  Position: Professor

Printed Name: Louis-Jacques Dorais Organization: Universite Laval

Address: Quebec, QC, G1K 7P4, Canada Telephone No: (418) 656-2131 ext. 7827

Date: March 4, 2003

**Attach this form to the document being submitted and send both to:**
Velma Mitchell, Acquisitions Coordinator
ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools
P.O. Box 1348
1031 Quarrier Street
Charleston, WV 25325-1348
304-347-0467 (Clearinghouse FAX number)
mitchelv@ael.org